

THE PATH OF ZEN



BARRY BRIGGS

INTRODUCTION

The Buddha observed that human beings are inherently unsteady. We wobble. You probably have experienced this in your life. I certainly have in mine.

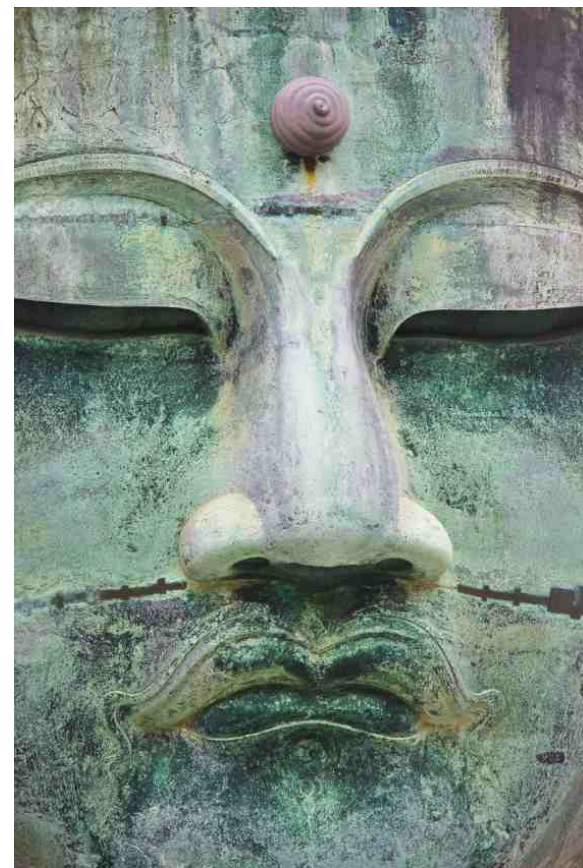
The word the Buddha used to describe this unsteadiness, *dukkha*,* originally referred to an unbalanced potter's wheel.

A wobbly potter's wheel won't produce good pots.

Similarly, an unsteady life can't foster healthy relationships.

When we practice Zen, life comes into balance and we can bring compassion and wisdom to all aspects of life.

Given the suffering that permeates our world, what could be more important?



**Dukkha* is most commonly translated into English as "suffering." *Dukkha* can refer to the psychological states of anxiety, unease, dissatisfaction, and anguish that everyone experiences. It can also refer to the deeper, more profound sense of imbalance.

ABOUT ZEN

Zen training arose in China as a simple, precise method for bringing life into balance.

The ancient Chinese masters knew from personal experience that all of us would continue to wobble unless we took concrete action – practice – to bring ourselves upright.

But the value of Zen does not reside in the practice itself. Rather, the value of Zen arises from the commitment and effort a person brings to the practice.

Consistent engagement (a fancy way of saying daily practice) has great effect.

Zen only asks that you try.

Day after day: Try.

That's the only requirement.



THE ELEMENTS OF ZEN

You can practice Zen in as little as 15 minutes each day and I've described a simple daily practice in *Appendix A* at the end of this book.

If you practice every day – without fail – your effort will transform your life.

Formal Zen practice employs five elements that work together:

- Vows
- Prostrations (bowing)
- Chanting
- Sitting meditation
- Wisdom training

The following pages provide an overview of each of these forms and *Appendix D* contains links to additional resources and information.



VOWS

Zen students around the world recite the Four Great Vows at the beginning of daily practice to orient life in a wholesome, beneficial direction.

*Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all.
Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.
The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all.
The Buddha Way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.*

My teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, condensed these vows into a simple question: “How can I help you?”

Imagine approaching every moment with the genuine intention to offer whatever might be required – without regard for self-centered reward, pleasure or satisfaction.

The Four Great Vows create this possibility.



PROSTRATIONS

*Renunciation is not the giving up of things of this world,
but accepting that they go away.*

- Suzuki Roshi

Even though we might agree in principle that everything changes, in reality we cling to fixed notions of the world and our place in it. We especially cling to our belief in *self*.

Bowing undercuts these fixed ideas. When our head touches the floor in a bow, these notions begin to slide away.

I train in a Zen school where practitioners perform 108 prostrations every morning. But I recommend that you begin with 9 full prostrations, done slowly and carefully. *Appendix D* links you to resources on performing prostrations.

Some people dislike the idea of bowing. They feel awkward or even embarrassed. You might also feel this way. So I suggest you try 9 bows every day for 30 days.

You might find that bowing is just bowing. Nothing more.



CHANTING

Many people think of Zen as sitting meditation. But Zen has always included the daily chanting of ancient Buddhist texts (known as sutras).

Chanting breaks down the illusory barriers that separate us from the world and, from this, true compassion appears.

For your daily practice, I recommend that you chant the Heart Sutra, a foundational text in the Zen tradition.

The words of the sutra may seem puzzling but its power is not in its meaning – the power resides in the doing. You'll find the text of the Heart Sutra in *Appendix B* and a link to an MP3 of the chant in *Appendix D*.

When you chant, don't be afraid of the sound of your voice. Let it be heard. It's the sound of your heart.

I recommend that, at first, you simply read the sutra aloud. This will take about 3-4 minutes. Over time, as you learn the music, your chanting can become more rhythmical.



SITTING MEDITATION

Sitting meditation brings us into reality.

Of course, we already believe that we live in reality. We trust our thoughts, perceptions, feelings and impulses.

And yet we continue to wobble.

Meditation addresses this confusion by cultivating steadiness and stability – and a quality of mind called “don’t know.”

Sitting meditation involves . . . sitting. You can sit on a mat or in a chair. It doesn’t matter. The important thing is that you sit quietly for the allotted time.

If you sit on the floor, you’ll want a firm cushion underneath your bottom. If you don’t have such a cushion, try sitting on a tightly folded blanket.

Whether you’re on a mat or a chair, sit with your spine long and straight, and with your head comfortably balanced.

(Continued on next page.)



SITTING MEDITATION, CONTINUED

Keep your eyes partly open and look down at the floor with a soft focus. This will help you stay alert and present.

Place your hands in the *maha mudra*, with the left hand resting in the right hand, thumbs lightly touching, fingers and thumbs forming an oval. Raise your hands slightly so they don't rest in your lap.

When you first begin, you may feel an impulse to scratch or fidget. Just continue sitting quietly. Of course, if your sitting position feels harmful, don't hesitate to change it.

Appendix D has a link to an excellent illustrated guide on sitting posture.

Zen teachers use a variety of techniques to reveal how the mind functions. Of these, the most common involves counting inhalations and exhalations. Since the breath is always with us, it's a convenient practice tool!

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SITTING MEDITATION, CONTINUED

Simply count each inhalation and exhalation, from 1 to 10, and then start over.

As you count, you may find yourself thinking about work, something your mother said, or a fantasy cabin in Norway. These kinds of thoughts are normal functions of mind and have little to do with the quality of your practice.

Some people assume that the purpose of meditation is to develop a quiet, calm mind. While you might experience such peacefulness occasionally, it will soon pass. And if you expect peace from your efforts, Zen will quickly disappoint.

The real benefit of meditation will show up in your daily life. After you've practiced for a while, you may find that you bring greater resiliency, creativity and responsibility to challenging situations and relationships. That's Zen!

You can sit in meditation for as little as 5 minutes each day. And if you make this effort – just 5 minutes – your life will become more upright, with less wobble and struggle.



WISDOM TRAINING

Wisdom establishes the cornerstone for a wholesome life. The Zen tradition employs several methods to develop wisdom, many of which (such as *koan* training) require the guidance of a teacher.

For those without such guidance, books can provide an alternative. Immediately after sitting meditation, you might spend a few minutes with a suitable book.

A skilled teacher can use language to illuminate aspects of mind and its function. When you read after sitting meditation, your own radiance will shine more brightly.

You might consider one of the following books, each of which offers deep insight into human life. (Of course, there are countless other worthy books.)

Dropping Ashes on the Buddha, by Zen Master Seung Sahn

It's Easier Than You Think, by Sylvia Boorstein

Zen Master Raven, by Robert Aitken, Roshi



INTEGRATION

The five practices of Zen described above have evolved over 2,500 years of investigation into the human mind.

Each element serves a precise function. And the elements work together to produce a whole and wholesome person.

If you avoid some aspect of practice, then your practice – and possibly your life – may remain incomplete.

For example, if we only practice sitting meditation, our center might become stable, but our compassion might never develop. You've probably met people with a strong center but a tight heart – we call such a person a *hard ass*.

Similarly, when we meet someone with an open heart, but a weak center, we say that they are easily *swayed* by their emotions and feelings.

So I encourage you avoid picking and choosing among the elements of Zen training. You may have your preferences – we all do – but remember that each serves a purpose.



THE LIFE OF ZEN

If you practice steadily, your life will change.

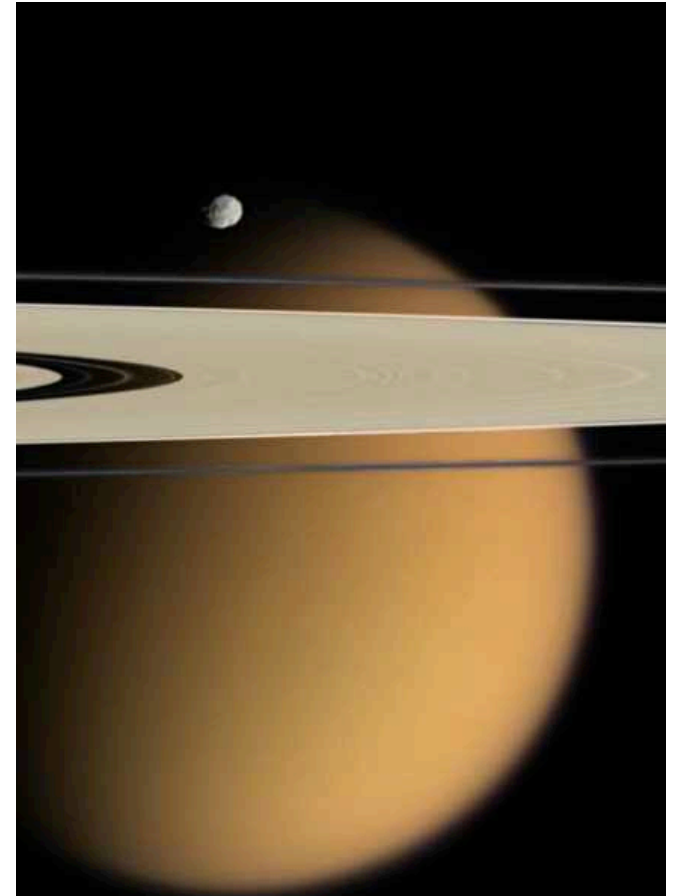
You will become more flexible and creative, more generous and joyous, and more relaxed and energetic.

These changes occur because Zen training brings you into direct contact with the reality of life.

And when your life becomes real, you can use it to ease the great suffering of the world.

My root teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, often concluded his letters with the following passage. I offer it to you with a sincere wish for your happiness:

*I hope you only go straight – don't know, which is clear
like space, soon finish the great work of life and death,
get Enlightenment, and save all beings from suffering.*



APPENDIX A: 15-MINUTE PRACTICE

The old joke about the best way to get to Carnegie Hall is no joke. If you want the benefits promised by Zen, you have to practice Zen.

For this reason, I encourage you to practice every day, seven days a week. If possible, practice first thing in the morning when the mind is rested, fresh and open.

If you can practice for longer periods, great! But you might begin with a simple 15-minute effort (see outline on the right), only increasing the time after you've developed consistency.

As I've noted several times, steadiness matters more than anything else. Practice every day.

When you're sleepy, do *sleepy practice*. When you're grumpy, do *grumpy practice*. When you don't want to practice, do *don't-want-to practice*.

Thank you for your effort!

15-Minute Practice

- Vows (1 minute)
- 9 Prostrations (3 minutes)
- Heart Sutra (4 minutes)
- Meditation (5 minutes)
- Reading (2 minutes)



APPENDIX B: HEART SUTRA

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva
when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita
perceives that all five skandhas are empty
and is saved from all suffering and distress.

Shariputra,
form does not differ from emptiness,
emptiness does not differ from form.
That which is form is emptiness,
that which is emptiness form.

The same is true of feelings,
perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

Shariputra,
all dharmas are marked with emptiness;
they do not appear or disappear,
are not tainted or pure,
do not increase or decrease.

Therefore, in emptiness no form, no feelings,
perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch,
no object of mind;
no realm of eyes
and so forth until no realm of mind consciousness.

No ignorance and also no extinction of it,
and so forth until no old age and death

and also no extinction of them.

No suffering, no origination,
no stopping, no path, no cognition,
also no attainment with nothing to attain.

The Bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita
and the mind is no hindrance;
without any hindrance no fears exist.
Far apart from every perverted view one dwells in Nirvana.

In the three worlds
all Buddhas depend on Prajna Paramita
and attain Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi.

Therefore know that Prajna Paramita
is the great transcendent mantra,
is the great bright mantra, is the utmost mantra, is the supreme
mantra which is able to relieve all suffering
and is true, not false. So proclaim the Prajna Paramita mantra,
proclaim the mantra which says:

gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha
gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha
gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

APPENDIX C: HOME ALTAR

You will find it easier to practice in a clean, quiet place. All you really need is a blank wall.

Still, many people enjoy having a small home altar as the focal point for daily practice. Such an altar can reflect both the inspirations and aspirations that brought you to practice.

You might place objects on your altar that have personal meaning and reflect your intentions.

My altar contains a purple polka-dotted statue of the Buddha, made by my daughter when she was young. It also holds a geode found by my father and other objects of personal significance.

A personal altar is just that – personal.



APPENDIX D: RESOURCES

The following web-based resources provide additional information on the details of formal Zen practice. You may need to copy and paste these URLs into your web browser.

Bowing

This webpage provides guidance on how to perform a full prostration.

http://www.koreanbuddhism.net/library/sangha_guide/view.asp?article_seq=376&page=1&search_key=&search_value

MP3 of Heart Sutra Chanting

You can use this file to learn the Heart Sutra's chanting music and rhythm.

<http://www.kwanumzen.org/2011/heart-sutra-in-english/>

Sitting Posture

This page contains excellent guidance on various meditation postures.

<http://www.mro.org/zmm/teachings/meditation.php>

Thoughts on Meditation

Norman Fischer writes on the why and how of meditation.

http://shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3561&Itemid=0



THE FINE PRINT

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About the Author

Barry Briggs has practiced Zen Buddhism for over 20 years and serves as a bodhisattva teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen.

Barry blogs regularly on Zen practice and daily life at *Ox Herding* (www.oxherding.com). Please visit when you can!

If you have questions about Zen practice, please feel welcome to contact Barry at oxherding@me.com.

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This book is dedicated to Zen Master Seung Sahn.
His “great shout” continues to echo in Zen communities around the world.

For more information on Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Kwan Um School of Zen,
visit the school’s website at www.kwanumzen.org.

